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ABSTRACT

The paper reviews the literature on the practice of mentoring as it applies to helping gifted/creative/talented students. It addresses: the attributes and traits of mentors and protegees; the roles of mentors; the relationship between mentors and students; how the needs of the gifted student might be filled through mentorship programs; and such program development concerns as program length, recruitment of mentors, selection criteria for mentors and protegees, and matching procedures. Includes 33 references. (JDD)

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Mentorships for Gifted/Creative/Talented Students

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The dropout rate in American schools has reached alarming proportions. A disproportionate number of these students are classified as "gifted". These students represent a national treasure and a resource that we cannot afford to squander. A viable method of assisting these students is through mentorships. This paper addresses the practice of mentoring as it applies to helping the Gifted/Creative/Talented student. We will examine some of the attributes and traits of mentors and the G/C/T protegee. We will look at the roles, the characteristics, the relationship, and how the needs of the G/C/T student might be filled through mentorships.

Mentoring has a long, varied, and successful history in western civilization. Formal roots go back to post-Hellenic Greece and are preserved in mythology, when Odysseus entrusted the education of his son, Telemachus to Mentor. The practice of mentoring is found in many cultures and is an accepted method of transmitting the culture, traditions and technology to the younger generation. Mentorships are found throughout business, industry and government and only within the last decade have they been (re)discovered by the educational community. In this era of declining test scores, increasing dropout rates, demands for excellence, and budget cuts, we seem to be losing many of the future leaders that may be best able to solve the problems facing our society. Mentor programs are seen by many to be one of the best ways to serve the specific needs of the gifted, rekindle their interest in learning, and foster the growth and development of this misunderstood minority.

What is Mentoring

Mentoring is the matching up of a younger person (the protegee) having specific interests with an older, more experienced person (the mentor) who has exhibited a skill or expertise in the area of interest of the protegee. The mentor/protegee relationship is special and according to Chauvin (1988) cannot develop between peers. A mentor is not a tutor. Gray and Daley (1983) state that a tutor provides remediation in basic concepts and skills while a mentor provides enrichment for knowledgeable and capable students to develop advanced skills. Tutors remedy diagnosed learning deficits to overcome student weaknesses, while mentors build on the protegees strength (Gray, 1983). Mentors also differ somewhat from the traditional concept of a teacher. Mentoring is the shared adventure of learning between two friends having a mutual interest and respect, and their relationship revolves around that interest.

Mentors

The roles and characteristics ascribed to mentors are varied and diverse. Chauvin (1988) uses the analogy of a guide to a foreign traveler in that the mentor points the way. He also provides support and challenges the imagination of the protegee. He/she allows the protegee to "dream dreams", provides a focus for visualizing or imaging, and encourages a disdain for mediocrity. He/she is a confidant, friend, supporter and tends to be more accepting and encouraging than others. House (1983) adds the roles of tutor, stimulator, role model and friend, while (Elligson et al, 1986) contribute the roles of facilitator,

counselor, and one who influences and nurtures. They also add that a mentor is more than a teacher. (S)He is the combination of a teacher and a friend. Mosley and Todd (1983) state that the mentor encourages the protegee to take risks, to try new things and to believe in themselves. Bellflower (1982) states that the mentor personifies patience, understanding and possesses "an intriguing mind". The role of the mentor, according to Lambert & Lambert, 1982, include the sharing of values, problem solving techniques and the aspects of lifestyle. The mentor also shares coping skills, techniques, tactics and strategies in addition to organizational and management skills (Shaughnessy & Neely, 1987). Merriam et al, (1987) cited in Bora & Phillips (1984), list 4 categories of skills that the protegees acquire from the mentor. These are: risk taking skills, communication skills, political skills and skills related to the profession. Gray & Daley (1983) subsume many of these functions and roles in their "helping relationship model".

Protegees

The protegee is a younger person who has a need for special and specific information or skill. It seems that the ladder to success often depends greatly on the ability of a protegee to obtain a mentor. Chauvin (1988), and Mosley & Todd (1983) found that most successful leaders could trace their inspiration back to one person who acted as a mentor. The majority of creative scientists cited by Pizzini (1985) had the benefit of a long term one to one relationship with a professor. Werner (1989) conducted a longitudinal study of 698 children born on Kauai, Hawaii in

1955. The study lasted for thirty years. Her study focused on the risk factors of reproductive stress and negative rearing environments. She identified numerous risk factors and found that the resilient children, those that managed to succeed despite being in a high risk group, had found someone (a mentor) that supported them and fostered their growth.

Gifted/Talented/Creative Students

The G/C/T have special needs that are not met in all too many cases. Many assume a gifted child is gifted in all areas. This is not true. Many students exhibit giftedness in one or more specific areas but are substantially below average in others (Levey & Dolan, 1988). Heacock, (personal communication August, 1988), stated that the gifted are frequently categorized into an unrealistic stereotype and according to the "law of compensation", they are not perceived to need any outside help. She also relates how the gifted have more problems with drugs, suicide and dropping out of school though others may disagree (Lajorie & Shore, 1981). Boredom, disaffection and disinterest characterize many gifted students. Hendricks and Scott (1987), citing (Bloom, 1982), claim that higher goals cannot be formulated until the student is interested and motivated. Their professional and personal development is often arrested until the natural curiosity of the student can be aroused or (re)activated. Debra Short (1985) illustrates many of the frustrations, roadblocks, and impediments that the gifted face. Because of archaic, outdated and misinformed notions about the gifted, many gifted are excluded from meaningful programs. Clasen and Hanson (1987) claim that

10% of the identified G/C/T students need programs that are outside the domain of the traditional classroom. Most educators agree with Maker, (1982) that gifted education should concentrate on qualitative changes which involve the product, process, environment and content. Traditional programs usually involve acceleration or enrichment. House (1983) states that the term "enrichment" means different things to different people and all too often "enrichment" degenerates into irrelevance or busywork. Honors courses or programs are not appropriate for many (Farnsworth, 1982). Gold (1986) relates that the gifted child who has a handicap will probably find himself or herself in a program that helps him or her overcome their disability, but ignores his/her specific talent. Levey and Dolan (1988) support this and add that many of the gifted find themselves in gifted programs that are non-supportive of their specific talent area e.g. (a highly gifted math student in a creative writing class.)

Due to the complexity of the G/C/T child's personality, the mode and the speed at which they process information, traditional methods of instruction may not meet their needs. In addition, the diversity of the modern student population forces most teachers to teach to the average mean and hope to accommodate the two extremes. All too often they fail. Pizzini (1985) states that many teachers lack the expertise to support a wide variety of self directed enrichment programs and these projects often fail because the teacher does not know the specific area well enough to be supportive. He goes on to note that there is a shortage of qualified teachers, the textbooks are out of date, out of touch, and do not meet the needs or interests of the students. He notes that 90% of the class is

textbook based, and that labs are generally used to verify either the teacher or the textbook. (Textbooks tend to be written for the lower end of the spectrum and fail to capture the interest of the gifted.

The Mentor/Protegee Relationship

The most obvious mentor/protegee relationship is found within the family. Parents may fill the role of mentor in some cases. Holeman (1984) found that 61% of the creative persons he interviewed listed family members as mentors, whereas 33% listed a teacher. Shaughnessy & Heacock (1987) state that parents tend to invest more time, effort and money in their own children but may lack the objectivity, skills, patience and perspective to sustain their child's growing and diverging interests. The true mentor/protegee relationship is based on a certain magic or "chemistry", and very little is known about the nature of this relationship (Shaughnessy & Neely, 1987a). Many consider the mentor/protegee relationship to be so fragile and tenuous that they are reluctant to try to quantify it, or to research it.

Mentorship Programs for G/C/T Students

Most school based mentorship programs are structured around Renzulli's Triad model and constitute type III activities and the Revolving Door Identification Model (Cellerino 1983). They provide real life experiences (Purdy, 1981), and are tailored to meet the peculiar needs of the G/C/T child (Ellingson et al, 1986, Shaughnessy, 1986). They also contribute to the affective domain (Harris, 1984), and the psycho-social

and developmental needs of the student (Clasen & Hanson, 1987). Mentorships are especially important to woman (Shaughnessy & Heacock, 1987, Shamanoff, 1985), and minorities (Mosley & Todd, 1983). These groups tend to be under-represented in the professional fields and may lack effective role models.

Securing a source of mentors is a problem noted by many. Solutions to this dilemma include establishing mentor banks, using a referral system, and soliciting service organizations (Purdy, 1981). Gray & Daley, (1983) enlisted pre-service teachers. Others have enlisted professional educators, or college faculty (Shaughnessy & Neely, 1987b). Most mentors are content to work gratis, with only their expenses reimbursed. The one program was conducted by exception Mosley & Todd, (1983), who paid the mentors for their services.

A number of program variations exist. These include direct or (traditional) mentoring, indirect mentoring, and double mentoring. Gray & Daley (1983) used preservice teachers in their indirect mentoring project. Indirect mentoring casts the mentor into the role of an intermediary. (S)he acts as a contact person and helps the protegee arrange field trips and meetings. Together they plan the project, compose and conduct interviews, compile and present the information gained from professional persons. Clasen & Hanson (1987) employed two mentors in their double mentoring approach. They used the services of professional counselors to help their protegees with coping skills, social adjustment and communication skills while members of the professional community

provided professional guidance, career development and worked with the students on projects within their area of interest.

The length of the programs vary from 8 to 12 weeks and involve between 25 and 100 hours of contact time. The location and types of activities are diverse and are determined by the field of the protegees interest. The details are arranged by mutual consent between the parties involved, and may/or may not involve a contractual agreement between them.

Selection criteria for the protegees varies among the authors. Lambert & Lambert (1982) identified their candidates by a marked discrepancy between their ability and their academic performance. They also sought students with weak interpersonal skills with their peers, and those with physical or emotional handicaps as well as students with skills in non-traditional areas. Gray & Daley (1983) accepted students with "higher than average grades and intelligence" and a strong degree of intrinsic motivation. Others use criteria based on local definitions of giftedness.

Matching of the mentor and protegee is done via committee or program coordinator and is generally done on the basis of genuine interest of the student. Other criteria such as the learning and/or teaching style and personality may be used on occasion (Harris, 1984). All authors agree to the importance of careful matching and state that establishing good matches is one of the few problems with mentoring.

One of the primary benefits of mentorships is they do not require expensive facilities, complex infrastructure or extravagant budgets. Because the administrative functions are done by the in-house staff, the

overhead is negligible. Boston (1985) demonstrates that none of the recent reports concerning excellence in the schools addresses the gifted student and concludes that comprehensive programs concerning the G/C/T are not a priority for high officials. The warning is clear. Any attempt to aid the gifted is a local concern and the schools cannot count on funding or support from the outside. Attempts to augment gifted education will have to be programs that do not require large budgets.

Training, documentation and evaluation are all important aspects of any continuing program and are well described in the literature. Comprehensive program descriptions, guidelines, flow charts, outlines, examples of activities and samples of the documents used in the programs are covered in: (Bryand & Wirewick, 1983), (Gray, 1983), (Gray & Daley, 1983), (Gray & Gray, 1983), (Gray & Rogers, 1983), Mosley & Todd, 1983).

Discussion

The task of providing an appropriate education to the gifted student is difficult when one considers the unique nature of the gifted student, the lack of supportive structures within and outside the schools, reductions in funding, class size and composition, facilities, texts, and teaching methods geared to the middle stratum of students. Gifted students are often bored by a pace that is too slow, materials that are unimaginative, or perceived as "busy work." Many teachers cannot contend with the broad cross-section of students, maintain discipline, keep up with the academic press, provide remediation and individualized instruction for the slower students and still provide the C/G/T with

challenging and imaginative assignments. Many teachers lack the training and breadth of knowledge to support the wide ranging interests of their gifted students. Many of the gifted programs fail to meet the individual needs of the students or cater to students with talents in non-traditional areas. Many of the truly gifted are denied admission to gifted programs due to "substandard" academic performance. Especially important, particularly for women and minorities, is access to successful and suitable role models. Many of the gifted have trouble relating to their "less mature" peers and benefit from association with older, more sophisticated persons.

Traditionally, giftedness has often been associted with estrangement, isolation and separation from the "normal" community. This negative aspect may become especially acute as we move into the information age. With our new technology we have opened new windows of communication while erecting walls that isolate and interfere with interpersonal interaction. Our technology has effectively removed the person from interpersonal communication. We sit behind our keyboars and color monitors and process information but never have the warm human interaction that is fundamental to our growth. We also lose the close contact and interaction which shapes and sharpens our ability to form bonds. How this isolation affects the G/C/T child is largely unknown, but one can assume the lack of nurture has a negative effect. Mentoring may serve to provide the "high touch" element needed in our "high tech" society. Mentoring may serve as a major source of nurturance to children of one parent families and to latch key children. We must train teachers not only to be instructors but to also

be nurturing role models and mentors. To supplement teachers and mentors we must also enlist a cadre of community personnel and paraprofessionals to serve as models and mentors. The future holods much promise for our gifted youth and an infusion of dynamic trained mentors may lead us out of "a nation at risk" and into a greater "search for excellence."

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